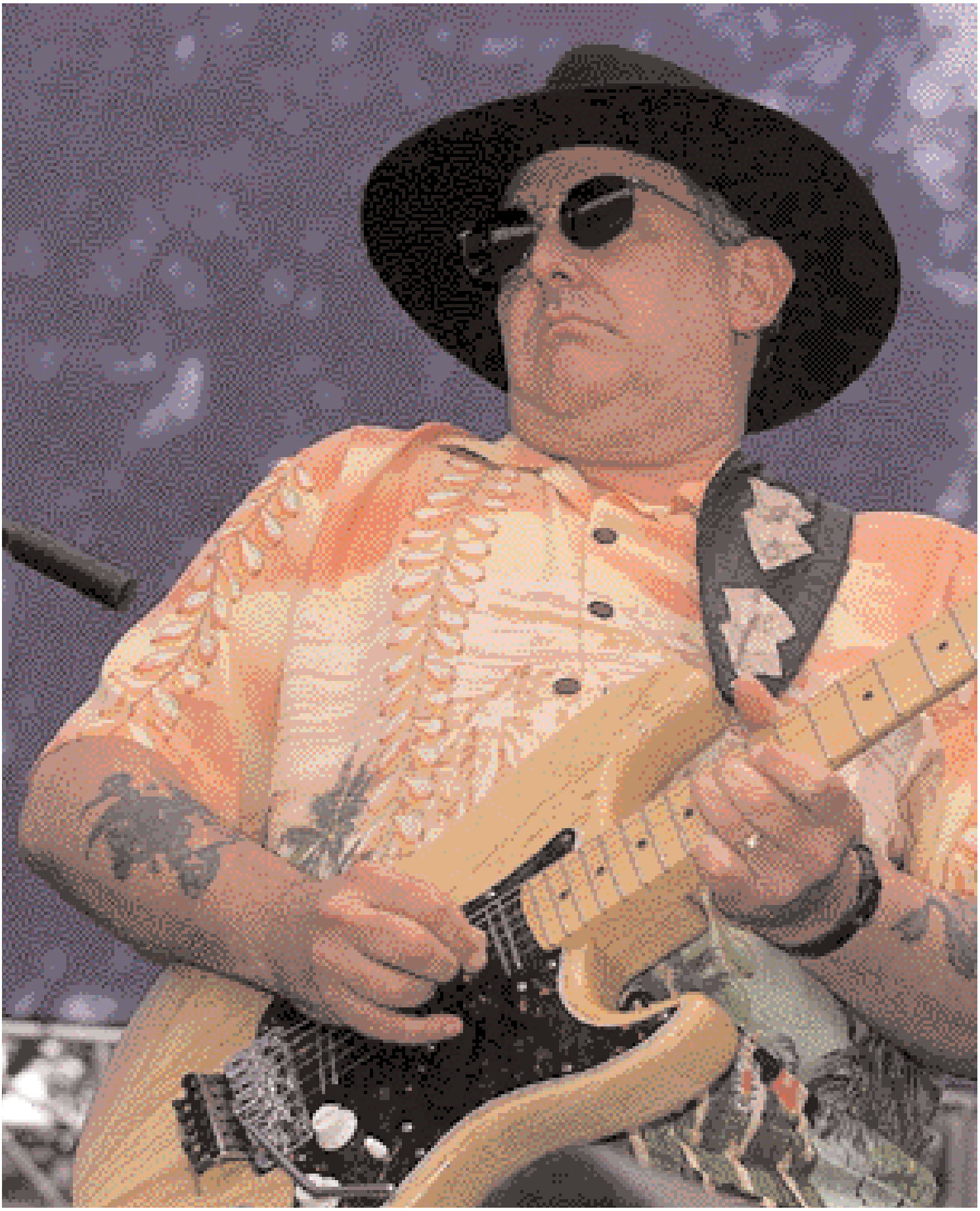
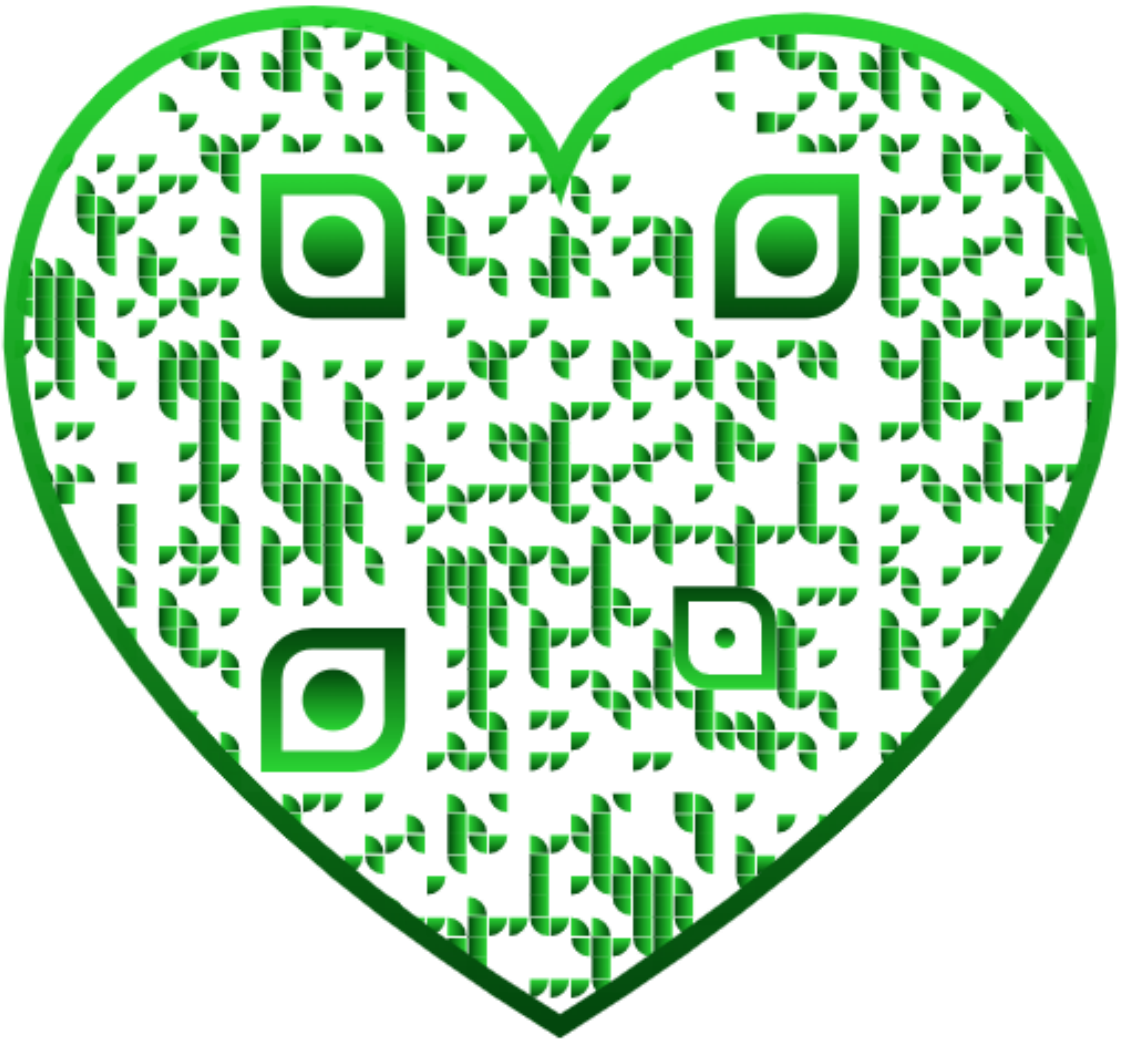




Connecting the Dots

Hot-Rod Your Blues Licks with Jimmy Thackery's Passing Tones

"I'm a self-taught musician," says blues guitarist Jimmy Thackery, "so I learn from my mistakes. If I screw up onstage and it works, I'll think, 'How can I do *that* again?' I'll try to recreate the train wreck, but with a bit more elegance. For better or worse, that's how I've developed my style."

BY ANDY ELLIS

PHOTOGRAPH BY XXXXXXXXXXXXX

Since 1974—when he co-founded the Nighthawks, Washington, DC's fabled road-house band—the hard-touring Thackery has forged a distinctive sound from blown licks and recycled slipups. During the process, he has discovered ways to escape the confines of the minor-pentatonic blues box by using chromatic passing tones.

"Sometimes I'll literally stumble across a note that will give a lick more juice," he says. "The trick is to venture beyond the blues scale, yet still have the line work in a 12-bar progression. Even if it's only for a beat, that extra color can add excitement."

In this lesson, we'll explore ten of Thackery's potent passing-tone phrases and discover what makes them tick. To help you digest the concepts, we've kept all the easy-to-play, yet vibey examples in the key of *A*. Once you've grasped a lick and its underlying principles, be sure to move it to other keys, different octaves, and alternative string sets.

Beads on a Wire

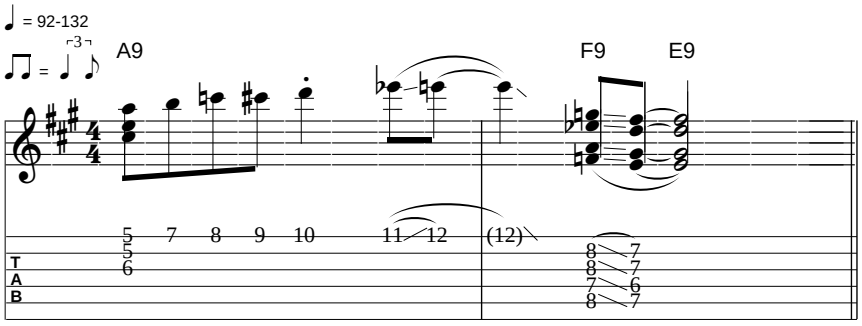
One of the easiest ways to spice up a blues lick is to approach scale tones from a half-step below. "I might play this at the end of a solo," offers Thackery, playing **Ex. 1**. Notice how the line ascends chromatically from *B* to *E* on the first string. In the *A* blues scale, *C*, *D*, and *E* are scale tones—the ♭3, 4, and 5, respectively. To create this six-note ascent, we launch into each scale tone from its lower neighbor: *B* leads to *C*, *C*♯ to *D*, and *E*♭ to *E*♮.

Of course, as a grizzled road warrior, Thackery doesn't indulge in such analysis. "Nah. I probably discovered this lick by accident, sliding along the first string until I reached *E*." Thackery's superbly developed ear allows him to take such seemingly casual liberties: Instinctively, he knows to pause on *D* and then rhythmically anticipate bar 2's high *E*. "Just play a lot," says Thackery, "and you'll begin to hear these things."

Another Thackery technique is to "connect the dots" between a pair of chord tones. "When I spot two notes on a given string that I know work with the background harmony," he elaborates, "I'll try to link them using pull-offs and slides, like this [**Ex. 2**]."

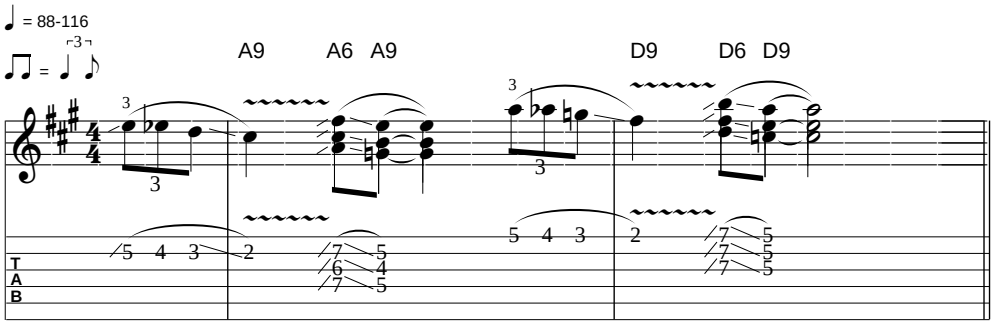
The opening move in this I-IV passage chromatically connects *A9*'s 5 (*E*) to its 3 (*C*♯). The two pulls and half-step slide add essential grease to the four-note figure. We repeat the 5-♭5-4-3 theme heading into bar 2, but this time, the chord tones belong to *D9*. The snazzy *A6*-to-*A9* and *D6*-to-*D9* fills evoke a soul band's horn section. "Because I usually don't perform with a rhythm guitarist," says Thackery. "I'm always looking for a chance to slip in some harmony while playing lines."

Ex. 1

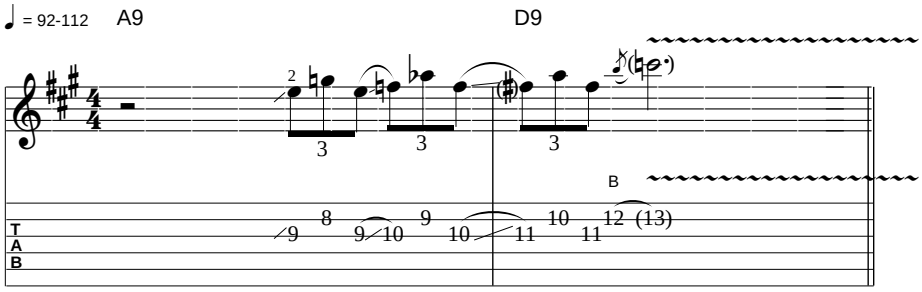


Thackery holds his flatpick so just its tip is exposed. Much of his attack comes from his well-worn index fingernail.

Ex. 2



Ex. 3



"It's not a race, it's music."— Joe Bonamassa, Nov. '94, *GP*

Chromatic Double-Stops

So far, we've been moving along a single string, using chromatic passing tones to link scale or chord tones. You can apply the same concept to an adjacent pair of strings by sliding a minor-third double-stop up or down the neck. "But instead of simply strumming the double-stops," explains Thackery, "try to create a melody by staggering the notes as you move along the strings [**Ex. 3**]. It sounds more dramatic."

In this I-IV lick, we start with a double-stop containing *A9* chord tones (*E*-*G*, or 5-♭7) and climb to a *D9* double-stop (*F♯*-*A* or 3-5). With its spiky "out-of-key" sound, the intermediate double-stop creates harmonic tension that's released in bar 2. The triplets supply an underlying rhythmic tension that's released with the concluding bend. Keep your fingers glued to both strings as you work through the double-stops.

"Here's a way to connect *E9* to *D9*," says Thackery, playing **Ex. 4**. "Now I'm descending along the top two strings. It's a simple lick, but it sounds sweet." As in the previous example, we're sliding a double-stop grip while alternately picking the strings. The results? A jagged, triplet-driven V-IV line that offers both harmonic and rhythmic tension and release.

Packed with ascending and descending chromatic moves, **Ex. 5** outlines a V-IV-I cadence. At the heart of the lick is the minor-third grip we encountered in Ex. 4, but this time we're using it to cover even more fretboard territory. "This phrase is very melodic," states Thackery, "yet it's easy to play, and it pulls you outside the blues scale. Sure, that's your launching pad, but people enjoy variety. That's why at home, I mostly listen to classical or Hawaiian slack-key records. By osmosis, I absorb these melodies and they find their way into my blues phrases."

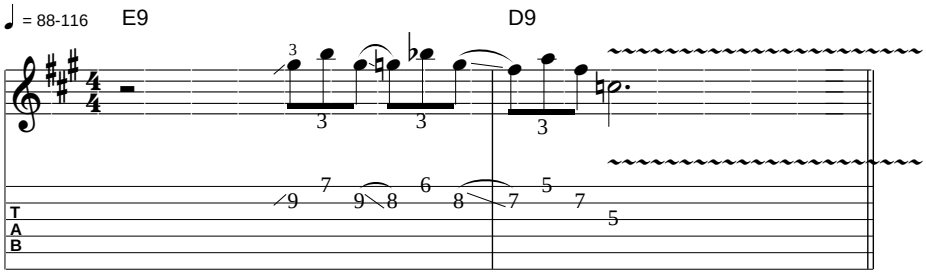
Nailing the quarter-step oblique bend in bar 2 can be tricky, but it's worth the effort. Barre both notes with the tip of your 1st finger, pluck the strings, and then gently swivel your fretting hand away from your body while holding the tones. If you pivot on the second string, it will stay put while the third string rises slightly in pitch.

Cross-String Tactics

Marching up and down a given string makes it easy to view chromatic moves, but it's not the only way to generate them. Carrying a chromatically enriched line across two strings lets you stay in one basic position, instead of shifting to an entirely new one. "When I'm working within the blues scale," says Thackery, playing **Ex. 6a**, "I might slip out of the pattern for a half-step to grab extra color, and then hop right back where I was."

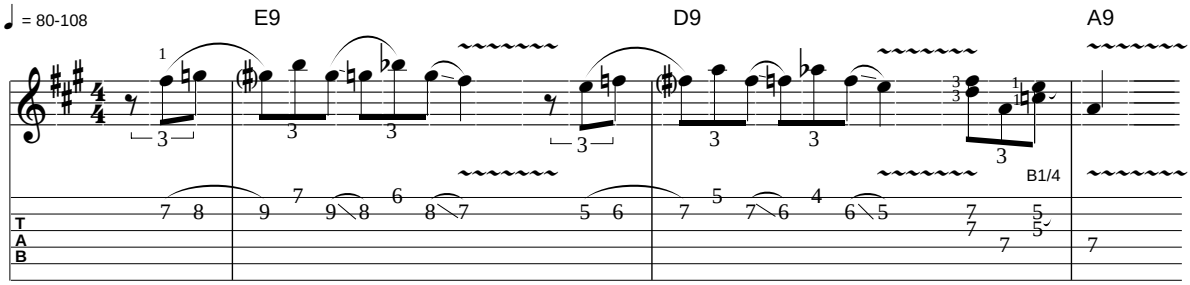
In this *A9* phrase, the chromatic line—*E*, *E♭*, and *D*, or 5, ♭5, and 4—spans the second and third strings. See how the ♭5 shift provides a momentary escape from the fifth-position

Ex. 4

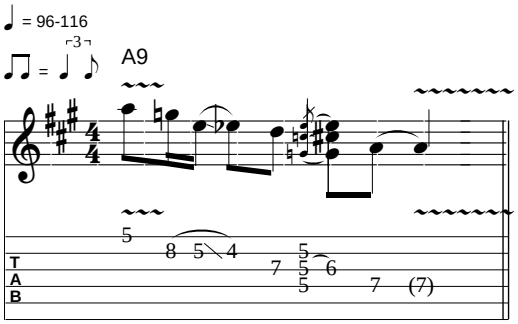


For big blues bends, Thackery uses two or three fingers to stretch a string.

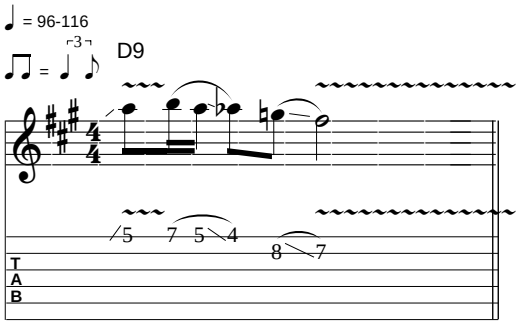
Ex. 5



Ex. 6a



Ex. 6b



PHOTOS: ANDY ELLIS

box? Thanks to the pull-off and slide, the second-string flurry feels as slippery as it sounds. **Ex. 6b** puts a similar twist on a *D9* lick. Both lines kick butt in a jump blues.

A nifty turnaround, **Ex. 7** shows how to reconfigure the chromatic *E*, *E*♭, and *D* motif so the ♭5 occurs on the third string. Here, the greasy slide occurs between the ♭5 and the 4, whereas it fell between the 5 and ♭5 in Ex. 6a. "Explore different fingerings, and you'll find new sounds," declares Thackery.

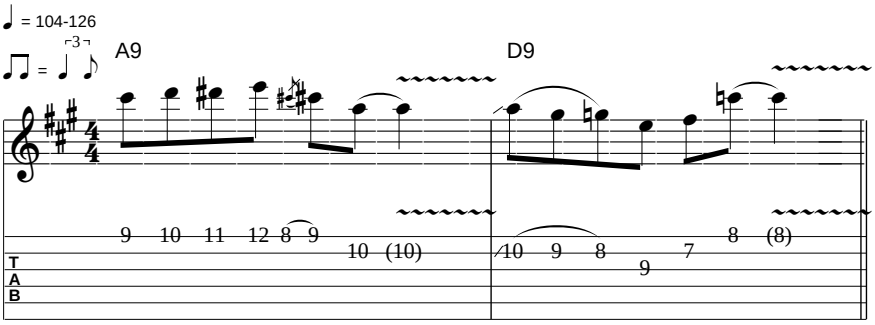
Fill in the Blanks

You can hot-rod virtually any blues line with a few well-chosen chromatics. **Ex. 8** illustrates one of Thackery's choice techniques, which is to begin a phrase with a chromatic burst and end it with a bluesy flourish. For example, the *A9* lick in bar 1 starts with a four-note chromatic climb (beats one and two) and concludes with a signature B.B. King interval jump (beats three and four). Similarly, bar 2's *D9* lick commences with three chromatic tones and closes with a tangy tritone leap. In each case, the chromatic segments result from approaching scale tones from a half-step below or above.

"Once you start exploring passing tones," says Thackery, "you'll find them right at your fingertips. Basically, it's a matter of filling a few

Ex. 7

Ex. 8



A ROAD WARRIOR'S WEAPONS

Thackery's primary stage guitar is a beat-up '64 Fender Stratocaster (Fig. 1), strung with Ernie Ball .010s and retrofitted with a Floyd Rose trem and Joe Barden humbucking pickups.

"The guitar was cherry when I got it in the early '80s," he admits, "but now there's not much finish left. When I run into guitar nerds, they're horrified that I put a Floyd on a vintage Strat, but I tell them, 'I play hard all night, and I never need to retune onstage. How many times a night do you retune *your* Strat?' My guitar repairman, John Warden, set the trem in a block of bowling-ball material, which turned the guitar into a sustain machine. Danny Gatton got me into Barden pickups, and these are some of the first Joe made."

The Strat's 1st-fret inlay (Fig. 2) is inspired by Thackery's original band, the Nighthawks. "This guitar was stolen once," he says, "and when the thief tried to sell it at a pawnshop, the owner recognized my signature inlay and grabbed the guitar for me."

Herco Flex 50 nylon flatpicks (Fig. 3) play an important role in Thackery's burly sound. "I'm addicted to them—there's something about their thickness that feels perfect. When I find gold Hercos in a music store, I buy every one."

Thackery keeps his pedalboard simple (Fig. 4). He plugs his Strat into an Ibanez Tube Screamer, and from there, the signal travels through an AC-powered Tube Works Real Tube overdrive, a Dunlop 535Q CryBaby wah, a pair of Boss DD-3 digital delays (one set for rockabilly slapback, the other to a long echo), and a Boss CH-1 chorus. The latter's stereo outs feed a pair of 40-watt Fender Hot Rod Deluxe 1x12 combos.

"Treat pedals as an *extension* of your sound," advises Thackery. "First get a big guitar tone, and then try to enhance it." — AE

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

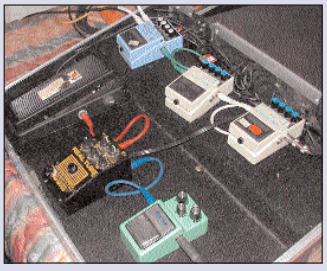


Fig. 4

PHOTOS: ANDY ELLIS

spaces in licks you already know. All you need is one or two passing tones to make a phrase come alive."

To illustrate, he plays **Ex. 9**, a flashy turnaround that combines dominant arpeggios, half- and whole-step pre-bends and releases, wide interval jumps, and two passing tones. Notice how the latter create chromatic ramps into sustained chord tones: In bar 1, we descend to *D* (*E9*'s ♭7); in bar 4, we ascend to *G♯* (*E9*'s 3).

Thackery's melodic chops are evident in **Ex. 10**, a swinging V-IV-I lick that features all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. "Musicians say, 'you're doing bebop,'" chuckles Thackery. "Well, I don't know from bebop—I just play what I hear. I guess after all these years of performing with sax and piano players, some of their ideas are bound to creep into my lines."

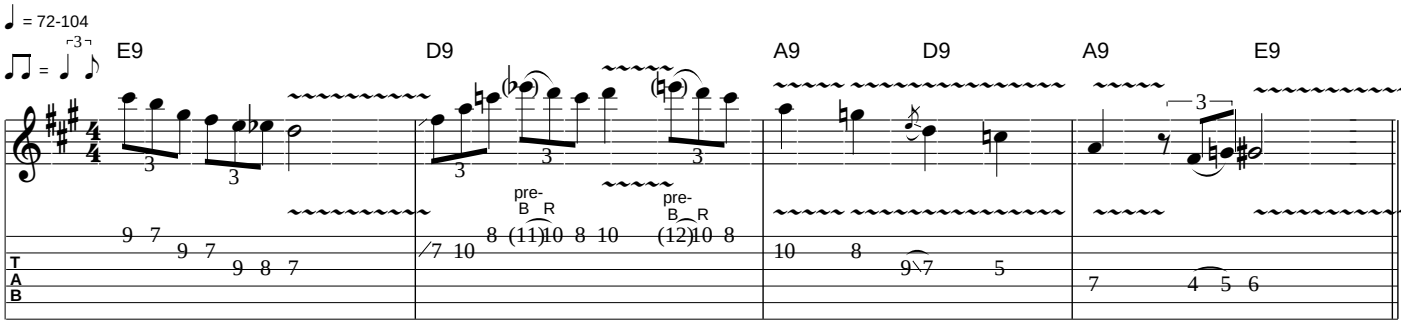
When playing fingerstyle, Thackery grasps the flatpick with his index finger, and plucks the strings with his other digits, including his pinky.

Buchanan's Ghost

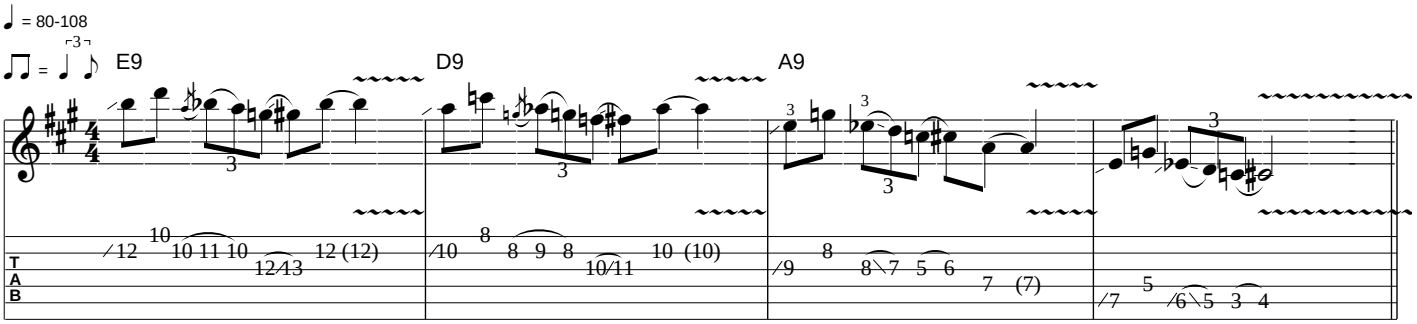
Thackery epitomizes the hands-on type of guitarist who learns to play by doing. "I've been gigging hard for more than 30 years," he explains. "My school has been the stage. Early on, I had the opportunity to pick up ideas from great guitarists. I was lucky to cross paths with Roy Buchanan; you didn't grow up in the DC area without being influenced by him and Danny Gatton. I played on some bills with Roy, and performed with him a bit too. Roy was a distant, strange man—he had some demons. That's the difference between him and Danny. In my mind, Gatton was a really happy guitar player. He played everything *up*, with tremendous precision and power. But listening to Buchanan is like reading Kafka [*laughs*]. He was dark and intense."

On his latest solo album, *True Stories* [Telarc], Thackery pays tribute to Buchanan by covering "The Messiah Will Come," one of the late Tele master's signature tunes. The track captures Buchanan's tortured tones and crying, microtonal bends with uncanny accuracy. "I'd never played that song before in my life," recalls Thackery. "but I thought it might be fun to do, so we laid down the rhythm tracks and then I took one pass at the lead. As the tape rolled, I began to realize it wasn't *me* playing. I'd never bent notes like that before. They don't exist on a piano; they lie in the crack between two keys. Everyone in the studio was going, 'Whoa.' You can take this however you want: I didn't play those solos, and I don't know who did."

Ex. 9



Ex. 10



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